

# When Children Die: Death in Current Children's Literature and Its Use in a Library\*

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## ABSTRACT

Death and dying are dealt with realistically and sympathetically in current children's literature. Books can play an important role in helping children suffering from catastrophic illness by showing how other children have coped with similar situations; they can also form a basis for bibliotherapy with patients. This paper examines current trends in children's literature and describes how these books have been incorporated into a patient library at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

EARLY in this century the aging and death of loved ones was accepted as a natural part of children's firsthand knowledge, as families were close together geographically. Today, because of our mobile society, many children are removed from knowledge of death and dying. Few grandparents live with families; more people of all ages die in hospitals than at home. Many children have never attended a funeral, and death is seldom discussed with them. Thus, children who face death themselves often do so in the absence of any firsthand experience with the death of others.

## DEATH IN LITERATURE

The cloak of secrecy is slowly being removed from this topic. An increasing number of books are available that deal realistically with acceptance of death and emotional adjustments following the death of a loved one.

Reading is one way to enhance feelings of

belonging. Through identification with characters and situations, readers are helped to feel less isolated. According to Joanne Bernstein:

Children, through reading, realize that others share their plight . . . their feelings are within the range of normality. And it is a relief to know that others suffer as they do. When children feel less isolated, they lose some of their embarrassment about their situation [1].

Readers' vicarious experience of the difficulties and feelings of characters leads to catharsis. This "may provide a release of tension through symbolic gratification of socially unacceptable urges or substitute gratification of socially approved motives" [2]. The purging of fear, anger, grief, and other emotions can come about in many ways. Reading is one way, as books can act as the agents that bring tears and evoke discussion of previously hidden feelings. In reading about an experience, children gain insight into the feelings and responses of others who share it.

There are a number of excellent books about serious illness and death in young people. Those discussed in the following paragraphs have been found appropriate for a patient collection. (A more extensive list, with publishing information, is available from the authors.)

## RECOMMENDED MATERIALS

Picture books, in addition to providing pleasure for young children, stimulate children's thinking and promote understanding. *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*, by Leo Buscaglia, is an allegory depicting the delicate balance between life and death. Margaret Wise Brown displays a keen insight into

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children's perception with her book *The Dead Bird*. In this story, children find a dead bird in the park and give it a funeral. Most children have participated in such experiences. A similar book by Mildred Kantrowitz entitled *When Violet Died* uses the death of a pet symbolically to show that nothing lasts forever. Sandol Warburg's *The Growing Time* is also one of the first books about death for younger children.

Another recommended book is Judith Viorst's *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. When Barney the cat dies, his young owner is so upset that he cannot eat or watch television. The child's father explains that things change in the earth, including Barney, who will change until he becomes part of the earth and helps things grow.

Miska Miles' Newberry Award book, *Annie and the Old One*, tells of a Navajo girl's love for her dying grandmother, who calmly accepts impending death. *A Taste of Blackberries*, by Doris B. Smith, is the realistic story of a young boy's death. It is a child's first-person account of watching his best friend die.

*A Summer To Die*, by Lois Lowry, is a touching story of two rival sisters, one of whom becomes ill with leukemia. The book deals with the various stages of dying and illustrates how the family copes. Gunnel Beckman's *Admission to the Feast* has as its subject the reflections and perspective of a nineteen-year-old girl who learns she has leukemia. Another outstanding book on the death of a teenager is *Eric*, by Doris Lund. This is a personal narrative by his mother, written with humor, intimacy, and beauty.

John Gunther's *Death Be Not Proud* is another moving book that deals realistically with acceptance of death. Adolescents will relate well to Norma Klein's *Sunshine* and Issacsen-Bright's *Thirteen Is Too Young To Die*, both powerfully realistic novels.

Many excellent nonfiction books have been written to help children cope with the mystery of death. Sara Bonnett Stein's *About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together* aims to help develop understanding and openness about death and feelings associated with it.

Eda LeShan has written three sensitive books on the fear of death: *What Makes Me Feel This Way?*, *Growing Up with Human Emotions*, and *Learning To Say Goodbye When a Parent Dies*. Stanley Klein's *The Final Mystery* is an excellent overview of death. Elaine Landau's *Death: Everyone's Heritage* is a source of information on euthanasia, care during terminal illness, suicide,

cryonics, funerals, cemeteries, and the plight of survivors.

A special book to become familiar with is *Straight from the Siblings, Another Look at the Rainbow*, written by thirty-four children with terminally ill brothers and sisters. An excerpt by Chet Stevens, age fourteen, illustrates the concept:

Why was his hair falling out? Why was he going to the hospital all the time? Why was he getting bone marrows all the time? It never occurred to me that he might die. What was happening? I didn't get to go to the hospital to see him. What was leukemia? Why was he getting so many presents? [3].

While books such as these are appropriate for anyone, when they are readily available, they may form the basis for a type of counseling called bibliotherapy.

#### BIBLIOTHERAPY

Reading, long used as a means of helping people cope with conflict, may be a viable way for children to deal with critical illness. From their reading, children come to understand that others experience similar fears, frustrations, and worries. By recognizing similarities between themselves and book characters, children can work out their problems vicariously.

Bibliotherapy is based on this belief that readers identify with characters in books in similar circumstances. Most simply defined, the term bibliotherapy means helping with books. The Greek roots of the word are *biblion* (book) and *therapeia* (healing). The *Dictionary of Education* states that bibliotherapy is the use of books to influence total development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature that is used for personality assessment, adjustment, growth, and clinical and mental hygiene [4]. The American Library Association's *Bibliotherapy: Methods and Materials* cites three factors that must be present in the dynamic interactions that take place in successful bibliotherapy. These include the author's communication with the reader, the reader's ability to understand and respond to the material, and the therapist's ability to perceive alterations in attitude and to bring those changes to a level of awareness in the reader [5].

It must be emphasized that bibliotherapy is a type of psychological counseling, and as such should be carried out by those with training in the area. Librarians without such training can offer

valuable assistance through their expertise in book selection.

A variety of hospital specialists, including social workers, psychologists, and nurses, may have the necessary training to engage in bibliotherapy with patients. However, they rarely have the knowledge of appropriate books or sources of such books. Medical librarians may need to inform them of the books available for bibliotherapy.

Materials for bibliotherapy should be carefully read and critically examined. The following criteria should be considered when selecting books for a bibliotherapy collection:

1. The nature and scope of the book should be appropriate for the patient population.
2. Factual information in the book should be accurate; depictions of treatment methods that are no longer used or outdated information on disease can do more harm than good.
3. The emotional impact of the book should be appropriate for the age level.
4. The book should have literary value as well as bibliotherapeutic usefulness.
5. The book should not be a propaganda piece for a particular type of treatment or outlook. Religious books should not be ruled out entirely, but should be carefully chosen.

It is not necessary to establish a separate collection for bibliotherapy. Appropriate books could be included in the medical library of the hospital. At St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, they are included in the patient library.

#### ST. JUDE PATIENT LIBRARY

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital is the largest pediatric oncology center in the United States. Its patient population faces life-threatening situations. The Hospital's Patient/Parent Support Committee is concerned with making life less stressful for families while they are at the hospital. One means to this end has been the creation of a book collection for patients' use.

The patient library opened in December 1983. It is staffed by volunteers whose work is coordinated by a member of the social work staff. The volunteers open the library at specified hours, deliver books to inpatients, and help with processing new books. The medical librarian serves as adviser and is primarily responsible for book selection and training in library procedures.

Most of the books in the collection are recreational in nature. However, it is also the librarian's intention to provide reading that might help patients cope with serious illness, handicaps, and the real possibility of death. Books purchased for this purpose are first reviewed by nurses, social workers, and the medical librarian. They are available to be checked out by any patient or parent, but they are publicized primarily to psychologists and social workers. Volunteers have found them useful because the books help them understand the emotions of the children with whom they work.

The patient library has become a focus for personal outreach. St. Jude's currently offers story hours and educational programs as time and staffing permit. The hospital hopes to hire a child life specialist, so that the patient library can grow as a resource for teaching and bibliotherapy. The creation of this collection has made the medical library a partner with clinical departments in addressing patient needs. There is increased interest in involving library personnel in patient education projects. The creation of a patient library is another step toward helping children come to terms with their illness and with the ever-present threat of death at an early age.

#### SUMMARY

Patient libraries containing fiction with more than recreational value are seldom found in hospitals. However, we believe that this is a direct way in which librarians can use their specialized skills to improve patient care and to support the efforts of other members of the hospital staff.

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